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COLETTE BAUDOCHE

The novel that Maurice Barrès has recently published under the title of *Colette Baudoche* is not only a noteworthy contribution to fiction, but also a historical and social study of unusual interest.

The action of the story is laid in Metz, the city in Lorraine where the fate of the colossal struggle of 1870 was practically closed in favor of Germany. The theme of the narrative is the conflict in the heart of an Alsatian girl between love for a German Professor and her noble ideal of loyalty to France. Colette Baudoche, the heroine, is a representative of the type of girl who is proud of asserting her French ancestry and sympathy on German soil. She lives with her grandmother in a modest dwelling. As their resources are meagre, the two women, after a long hesitation, become reconciled to the idea of renting a room of their apartment to a young Professor of Königsberg, Frédéric Asmus. This young German is one of the army of peaceful invaders which since 1870 has been flowing into Alsace. He is gradually inspired by the surroundings and the noble atmosphere of Metz; he travels over the country and mingles with the people; he admires their easy, graceful bearing and good manners, the clearness and the harmony of their speech. While his taste is thus captivated by the outward forms and intrinsic worth of French civilization, his heart is fascinated by the winning charm of Colette, who represents to his eye a living expression of French spirit and grace. He soon thinks of marrying her, and after careful consideration discloses his intention to her and Mme. Baudoche. The two women are naturally perplexed, for they fully appreciate the sterling character of the Professor, and the grandmother especially is well aware that a marriage would mean an assured future to her beloved Colette. Unfortunately, however, he is German. They decide to defer a decision and give a final answer to the Professor when the latter returns from a journey to Königsberg, where lives the sweetheart he has decided to forsake for the beautiful Colette. The irresolution of the two women before the situation thrust

upon them is finally overcome after a most impressive ceremony in the Cathedral of Metz — a ceremony performed each year in memory of the French soldiers who fell under the walls of the city in the battles of 1870. Colette decides that everything must be sacrificed, even the happiness of a lifetime, to what she believes to be an ideal and lofty sentiment of honor. She tells the Professor that she cannot become his wife, that she has valued highly and always will value his friendship, but that she must answer the call of a greater obligation to the sacred memories of her country. . . . Such is in outline the plot of the story.

One can easily see that the structure of the novel is exceedingly simple and therefore lacking in those elements of excitement or complication or surprise that bind the attention and the interest of the average reader. It is a novel that will appeal particularly to those who delight in the artistic representation of real life and in the conflict of human emotions, rather than in the elaborate charm of fanciful deeds and situations. In this last work, Barrès has again aimed at the same austerity and simplicity that characterized his previous novel, *Au Service de l'Allemagne*. He has again shown a praiseworthy eagerness to keep aloof from the trend of present taste and to avoid all such common means as might have won for his book a larger audience. In *Colette Baudoche* the highly colored style, the sumptuous images, and the haughty display of a poignant individualism impatient of social discipline,—qualities that have made Barrès inimitable in his earlier works — no longer appear. The whole atmosphere in which events occur and characters move is here spiritualized no less than are thought and style, sensation and sentiment.

This accounts for the fact that the narrative, simple in content and unpretentious in form, is quite capable of making a lasting impression, an impression that is due in large measure to the enthusiastic genius of the writer, which seems to animate and enhance with affectionate sympathy the life of the characters he portrays, and charge with symbolic meaning the things and places he describes. Whatever be the excellence of Barrès' style in this work, one easily feels that it is intimately

associated with and dependent upon the constant inspiration of patriotic sentiment. For here it is not a style reflecting such æsthetic qualities as may characterize mere force of intellect, nor is any effort made toward a search for that technical perfection which is only too often an indication of penury of thought. The charm of the style consists solely in its great force of suggestion. Its appeal is binding because it springs from an intimate fusion of thought and expression, from a correspondence highly convincing between the writer's *état d'âme* and outward nature in all its manifestations. It is a style thoroughly imbued with that enlightened sincerity of effort which never fails to command admiration and often finds an echo in the human heart. There is, above all, in his style the elusive harmony of poetic emotion, for all his characters and landscapes have long dwelt in his heart before they found literary expression. The writer infuses into his subject-matter the living and suggestive force of a delicate feeling and reverence. He seems to have lived in constant and spiritual intimacy not only with the men but with all objects of historic interest and natural beauty in Alsace and Lorraine, and so he feels and communicates life to what appears to be deprived of life. For example, the monuments themselves, whether it be the lofty cathedral of Metz or the modest tombs of war victims scattered in the neighboring country, appear to him as powerful symbols of undying memories conveying the silent message of the past to the present. *Nihil sine voce est*. And this ideal communion with eternal things is not in the literary fashion of the symbolistic school but rather in accord with the human sentiment of the Virgilian *sunt lacrymæ rerum*.

There is somewhere in the novel a passage which indicates clearly the attitude of the author throughout the book. "Il est impossible d'aimer," says Barrès, "voire de comprendre aucun objet si nous n'avons pas mêlé nos songes à sa réalité, établi un lien entre lui et notre vie. C'est peu d'avoir consciencieusement tourné autour d'une belle chose; l'essentiel c'est de sentir sa qualité morale et de participer du principe d'où elle est née. Il faut devenir le frère d'une beauté pour bien commencer à l'aimer."

These words explain the secret of his art in *Colette Baudoche*. And it is after all natural that he should have felt so keenly the fascination of the country around the Vosges where he was born and where his early education progressed in the midst of the trying calamities visited by war upon his people and his own family. These early and poignant remembrances, somewhat softened by age, seem to form in the novel a spiritual background upon which are reflected in sympathetic atmosphere the cold and dreary realities of life. The immediate result of this earnest love for the complex life that his affectionate imagination far more than his art has fixed in *Colette Baudoche*, is one of unmistakable and convincing appeal—a fact that is the more significant in that the leading characteristic of Barrès as a stylist has nearly always been one of too conscious effort and not unfrequently of studied and deliberate affectation. The stylistic element is indeed of such importance that it can hardly be overestimated in this work of Maurice Barrès, for it is undoubtedly by virtue of its magic charm and simplicity that the narrative assumes a well-defined meaning even in its smallest details.

Yet beyond its excellence of form this new book of Barrès' must have other unusual qualities, else we should be at a loss to account for its great success and the spontaneous admiration it has elicited from all quarters. One may here venture to say that in works of art the subject-matter is a question of minor concern; that the manner and form in which a thought is developed and expressed is the preëminent factor; that, as Villemain puts it: "le génie consiste à revêtir une idée banale d'une forme définitive." Fortunately, in the case of *Colette Baudoche*, one needs not apply the questionable truth of Villemain's definition, for while it is evident that scarcely any effort is made toward originality, yet both in thought and language *Colette Baudoche* is free from all banality; it is characterized by that severe and inspiring simplicity of which, at its best, style is only a powerful adjunct.

It is hardly in place here to inquire into the relative merits of *Colette Baudoche* as compared with the numerous other contributions of Barrès. Such a task would be difficult and un-

satisfying, for the simple reason that the literary production of this French writer is far too complex in nature and varied in scope. But whatever may be the work that will insure for its author the recognition of time, many will nevertheless feel that of all Barrès' books this latest one will be most likely to survive, for it was not meant to be merely an interesting novel of the day, nor a psychological study of character. It is rather a dramatic portrayal of the attempted reconstruction of two different civilizations, or of two national spirits which force of events has brought together and which with the lapse of time have so far failed to blend into harmony. It depicts the drama without *dénouement* which, since the close of the terrible war of 1870, two peoples with opposing traditions and tendencies have been enacting in Alsace and Lorraine.

Though the frame of the book is thus historical, we can hardly call the work a historical novel. The author has not proposed to revive a *genre* which has had its day and which artistic fashion has perhaps too hastily discarded; nor has Barrès intended, in accordance with a certain aristocratic turn of his intellect, to surround with a halo of glory the leaders who have always engaged upon the soil of Alsace in the futile attempt to bend the stubborn and unyielding attitude of the conquerors, or in the task even more futile of securing for the oppressed the same rights and privileges that other German provinces enjoy. His aim is rather the historical reconstruction of the humble, the sympathetic revelation of hidden forces each striving to keep kindled in the heart the hope of warm patriotism and to preserve unchanged in the whirl of trying vicissitudes a personality formed and strengthened through a costly process of social and national development. His is not only an evocation but a true apotheosis of the commonplace, and in this Maurice Barrès has once more shown that real literary greatness may be simple. As we read this story we feel as if our own selves were identified with the spiritual forces that are set in motion towards heroic humility and the self-forgetful assertion of patriotism struggling against fatality. We feel that our sympathy is gradually aroused by the persevering faith which the Colettes of Alsace and Lorraine keep intact in their hearts and by the

revelation of an unfortunate love that the avowal of a noble sentiment shatters forever.

On the other hand, it is equally evident that the intention of the writer is not to develop a thesis that would in any way influence him to sacrifice or modify the varied evidence of reality for the sake of proving any *a priori* contention. He thus felt it his duty, not only as a writer but also as a man, to avoid the least misrepresentation that might have marred true impartiality of observation and of judgment whenever there was involved the evaluation of the opposite forces in the drama that still goes on in Alsace. In this respect the veracity of the novelist is thoroughly convincing. Both sides of the tragic controversy that is so poignantly typified in Colette Baudoche and Professor Asmus are presented in the book with unerring accuracy, with an appreciation both naïve and austere, entirely unhampered by resentment. Conscious of the important mission that he proposed to fulfil, Maurice Barrès understood that the dispassionate reader would not excuse any faltering expression or condone any superficial impression through possible sympathy for the cause he upholds. He realized that he could not place directly the right or the wrong on either side, since the solution of a problem that has confronted both adversaries for over forty years seems in fact scarcely attainable. Indeed, one may here and there see that Barrès' attitude is wellnigh one of admiration for the conqueror. He intimates that such a rôle cannot and must not be his, for the Germans have more than one way in which to show their legitimate pride. He naturally loves the conquered in that the latter show a heroic, almost incredible power of resistance. And Barrès has happily presented in his book the tragic situation arising from a cruel misunderstanding that forces irreconcilable enemies to live in perennial association.

It was early in 1840 when the future William I wrote in verse a memento to the populations of the Vosges and of the Ardennes: "Listen," he said, "to the call of the Germans; be ashamed of the servitude that the Franks impose upon you. If you heed not or feel not ashamed of your servitude, we shall indeed force you to fulfil your duty toward the fatherland so that one day your descendants may be true Germans and thank the conquerors

of their fathers." The same hopeful outlook was anticipated by the Germans the very day the two alienated provinces were restored forcibly to the common fold. Yet, forty years after, the sons of the generation that was conquered cling no less firmly to the ideal of old, and no word of praise for the conquerors comes from their lips. Now, in this novel of Barrès, everything seems to be subordinate to this very intimate dissension between actual conditions in Alsace and Lorraine and the failure of the historical precedents just mentioned to bring about the results which the Germans were looking for.

Here, too, the same antagonism is effectively voiced in a mild form by Colette and Asmus: "Un jour," writes Barrès, "ils tombèrent sur un passage où l'on racontait qu'à l'époque d'Henri l'Oiseleur, Metz avait subi l'attraction germanique.

"Vous voyez, mademoiselle, que vous avez été Allemande une fois, fit le professeur avec une malice bonhomme.

"Et il déclara ne pouvoir comprendre que des gens raisonnables perdissent leur temps à s'obstiner contre le fait accompli. Pourquoi boudier une nation où ils avaient occupé une belle place? Où était le déshonneur de penser aujourd'hui comme leurs aïeux avaient pensé?

"Colette, toute rouge, répondit:

"Je ne sais pas ce qu'ont pensé, il y a mille ans, les gens de Metz, mais je sais bien que je ne peux pas être une Allemande.

"Un geste de sa grand'mère essaya vainement de l'arrêter. La jeune fille poursuivit:

"Nous ne consultons que notre cœur. Et vous, monsieur Asmus, quand vous avez choisi votre fiancée, avez-vous consulté vos livres d'histoire?"

The logical inference we draw is that two distinct nationalities come into daily contact on the soil of Alsace, but in spite of this coexistence based on a community of varied relationships, their spiritual and intellectual life keeps them as widely apart as they were when the theoretical process of fusing them began. Obviously the great purpose Barrès had in mind when he wrote *Colette Baudouche* was, through the tangible example of daily life in Alsace, to prove that a national personality which is but the accumulated development of the character of previous genera-

tions cannot be overcome by a mere reorganization of racial affinities; that the sentiment of a common country from which the Alsatians were rudely disrupted cannot be easily effaced from their hearts, because, while we wait for a broader ideal than patriotism to dawn upon the world, true love for one's country will continue to be shown and perpetuated in deeds of heroic abnegation and oblivion of one's self even to the surrender of life.

The impression one gathers in reading the book is that in the attempt at an objective treatment of the soul of Alsace, Maurice Barrès appears to better advantage as a portraitist than as a novelist. *Colette Baudoche* is only incidentally a novel, and thus the types the author represents are not idealized nor are they in any way modified by his artistic temperament, they may live in Metz or Strasbourg, in Colmar or Mülhausen, in any of the villages of Alsace and Lorraine, wherever there is shown a constancy of determination not to accept voluntarily from the conquerors anything that would offend the dignity of patriotic sentiment. Indeed, the fact that *Colette Baudoche* is only incidentally a work of fiction is one of great importance, since here a question arises that comes fairly within the scope of the present review and deserves to be mentioned at length.

It appears that the decision of Colette not to marry Professor Asmus has met with objections at the hands of some critics. For this connection it may be interesting to know that the great poet Mistral, and Jaurès, the well-known leader of the socialist party in France, both expressed to the author of *Colette Baudoche* their disappointment at what they call the unexpected and unreasonable foolishness of the young Colette. These two distinguished men would have much preferred a happy close for the book, and this for reasons that they openly disclose to the author. Thus writes Mistral to Barrès: "Vous y [in the novel] rendez si sympathique le terroir et la race que le bon gros Allemand Frédéric Asmus est vaincu en peu de temps, et vaincu de façon si naturelle et si honnête qu'on regrette vraiment la maussaderie finale de la petite Colette. Étant donné que le germanisme finit toujours par se fondre dans la latinité (à preuve la fusion rapide des innombrables envahisseurs de l'empire ro-

main), il est certain que, par le seul effet des influences naturelles, les immigrés allemands sont destinés à faire des fils et petits-fils lorrains, et, par eux, la Lorraine reprendra son autonomie. Je remarque, en Provence, que les fils des mètèques sont généralement plus ardents que les indigènes de vieille roche. C'est le mystère de la greffe. Donc, j'aurais vu avec plaisir le bon docteur Asmus contribuer à repeupler Metz de jeunes patriotes. Il méritait bien cette jolie récompense."

Not very dissimilar is the regret expressed by Jaurès. While he does not state as openly as the Provençal poet that French civilization, which is but Latin in essence, may eventually conquer in Alsace the *ferum victorem*, he is nevertheless willing to admit that this may partly come to pass. He finds it somewhat strange, however, that Colette should be so obstinate in refusing the man upon whom French charm has so intimately operated.

"Et Colette?" he says, "elle refuse de se marier avec Asmus, soit. Mais elle a hésité; on a entrevu que, si elle épousait Asmus, elle travaillerait avec lui à réconcilier Français et Allemands. . . . Il se pourrait bien, que, depuis deux mille ans, il y eut, de ce côté-ci du Rhin des Colette qui ne veulent pas épouser des Asmus. Quand, par force, le mariage s'est accompli, M. Asmus, après s'être fait appeler quelque temps M. Asmus-Baudoché, s'est trouvé, un beau jour, Baudoché tout court, ne voulant plus rien savoir des Asmus."

Jaurès' view is such as we should naturally expect a man to express whose attitude is largely determined by political and social preconceptions. That of the Provençal poet is but the effusion of an optimistic nature with an unbounded faith in the victorious mission of the civilization of his own people. So intense is his humanity that it makes him regretful that two creatures are thus made to suffer. But, although the novelist recognizes the admirable sentiments that underlie these criticisms, yet his own life has made him far more familiar with actual conditions at Metz; and he knows only too well that the optimism of both Mistral and Jaurès may prove entirely baseless. At the close of the book he hints clearly his fear as to the ultimate fate of the Alsatians: "Nous, cependant, acceptons-

nous qu'une vive image de Metz subisse les *constantes atteintes qui doivent, à la longue, l'effacer?*" So the novelist was not hampered by sentimental limitations, and has preferred to see in the action of Colette the triumph of will over the obstacles that oppose it, the indifference to all that brings personal satisfaction, so that the sentiment of the heroine may be purified through hardship and thus she may share worthily the common sorrow of her people.

It could not have been otherwise, if the book was to be to the very end a faithful portrayal of actual life in Lorraine. If Barrès had intended to write a book of pure fiction, a close such as Mistral and Jaurès suggested might have been possible, though it is questionable if it would enhance the artistic effect of the book. But, as we have already remarked, *Colette Baudoche* is only incidentally a novel, and so any effort toward a close *à effet* would have violated its purpose. It was, therefore, owing only to the prominent places that both Mistral and Jaurès occupy that Barrès deemed it advisable to answer their criticisms with a few pertinent remarks. There was really no necessity for the author to take the stand in defence of what is evidently a logical conclusion in the book, but the following argument advanced by Barrès seems unanswerable :

"C'est bien oiseux," he says, "de chercher, avec le noble poète de la Provence et avec le puissant orateur des socialistes, si Colette doit épouser Asmus. Allez le demander à Metz. Tout Metz vous dira, d'une voix unanime :—Nos filles n'ont que faire de leurs fils ; elles ne sont pas pour des Prussiens."

Now, the fact that Maurice Barrès is a member of the French Academy and unquestionably in the front rank of living French writers may partially account for the eagerness with which each succeeding production of his is received both in and out of France. In the case of *Colette Baudoche*, however, we feel that Barrès has given us a book scarcely surpassed by any of his previous ones. If we may rightly judge by the universal admiration that the book has already won, its place among the few French novels of recent years that are likely to live is securely fixed. And it is not surprising. Whatever the opinion of

critics may be with reference to the qualities of form and content whereby the excellence of a novel is measured, or however the taste in literary appreciation may differ, there is always a common ground where ultimately intellectual dissension ceases and a great book emerges to stand solely on those qualities that are eminently human and that no changing fashion of art can affect. In the long run, enduring admiration is more readily bestowed upon the book in which are expressed the higher ideals of man, even though these ideals may lack the characteristics of universality and be accordingly confined to a certain people or epoch. Of such ideals the humble no less than the great may be formative factors. This latest novel by Maurice Barrès is a successful endeavor to this very end, as we see in it artistically reflected a part of the ever-changing horizon within which is laboring the ascending evolution of a people.

A prophecy as to whether the present obstinate effort of Alsace and Lorraine to preserve intact their national individuality will save them permanently from the all-powerful mould of German influence is here irrelevant. In *Colette Baudoche* the author may, indeed, openly intimate that the problem of Alsace is far from settled and that the violence perpetrated in the treaty of Frankfort against the natural rights of the annexed provinces is not yet atoned. But we cannot be very deeply concerned in this, although, through a superior sense of justice we may feel inclined to admire this ideal assertion of a patriot. For us, the lasting impression of the book rests upon elements of greater importance: upon the stubborn resistance which, forty years after France withdrew, is still shown against the preponderant political and cultural expansion of Germany in Alsace; a resistance that time has not yet impaired and that difficulties and persecutions have failed to subdue; upon the successful zeal that urges a people to affirm a sacred inheritance of thought, of taste, of pride, and of independence, received from France; upon the determination of Alsace to cling to an ideal which, to a people conscious of its dignity, is, after all, the only goal worth striving for. Such is the message of *Colette Baudoche*, a message that will long linger in our memory,

for even though the future may leave unanswered the call which closes the book and in which is echoed the aggressive sentiment of the author, the appeal of the novel will remain unchanged, and the book will always be admired as a true and powerful representation of humble effort toward a sublime ideal.

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